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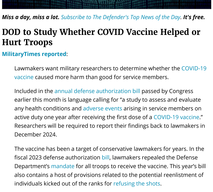
DOD to Study Whether COVID Vaccine Helped or Hurt Troops + More

The Defender's Big Brother NewsWatch brings you the latest headlines related to governments' abuse of power, including attacks on democracy, civil liberties and use of public surveillance. The views expressed in the excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender.

By **The Defender Staff**



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DOD to Study Whether COVID Vaccine Helped or Hurt Troops

MilitaryTimes reported:

Lawmakers want military researchers to determine whether the COVID-19 vaccine caused more harm than good for service members.

Included in the annual defense authorization bill passed by Congress earlier this month is language calling for "a study to assess and evaluate any health conditions and adverse events arising in service members on active duty one year after receiving the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine." Researchers will be required to report their findings back to lawmakers in December 2024.

The vaccine has been a target of conservative lawmakers for years. In the fiscal 2023 defense authorization bill, lawmakers repealed the Defense Department's mandate for all troops to receive the vaccine. This year's bill also contains a host of provisions related to the potential reinstatement of individuals kicked out of the ranks for refusing the shots.

But the research mandate — inserted by Republican House members during debate on the legislation — takes that further, again calling into question the safety of the vaccine. The study will look at "any health condition developed after receiving such first dose, regardless of whether the condition is attributable to the receipt of such first dose," and "an accounting of adverse events including hyperimmune response" linked to the vaccine.

House Republicans had also pushed for language prohibiting military leaders from mandating masks to prevent the spread of future COVID-19 outbreaks, but that language was dropped in final deliberations over the bill.

Google Experiments With 'Faster and More Adaptable' Censorship of 'Harmful' Content Ahead of 2024 U.S. Elections

Reclaim the Net reported:

In the run-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Big Tech engaged in unprecedented levels of election censorship, most notably by censoring the New York Post's bombshell Hunter Biden laptop story just a few weeks before voters went to the polls.

And with the 2024 U.S. presidential election less than a year away, both Google and its video-sharing platform, YouTube, have shown that they plan to censor content they deem to be "harmful" in the run-up to the election.

In its announcement, Google noted that it already censors content that it deems to be "manipulated media" or "hate and harassment" — two broad, subjective terms that have been used by tech giants to justify mass censorship.

However, ahead of 2024, the tech giant has started using large language models (LLMs) to experiment with "building faster and more adaptable" censorship systems that will allow it to "take action even more quickly when new threats emerge."

The Campaign by U.S. States to Curb Social Media Will Be Tested in 2024

Yahoo/Finance reported:

U.S. states are testing a series of new legal ploys and laws designed to erode social media's reach, creating a prime battleground for the tech industry in 2024.

Attorneys general and lawmakers from states across the U.S. spent much of 2023 trying to pressure outfits like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram with outright bans, legislation requiring greater content, or lawsuits alleging the companies violated state consumer protection laws.

States passed at least 65 new tech laws this year targeting child safety, data privacy, artificial intelligence, and content moderation, according to a new report from the University of North Carolina's Center on Technology Policy.

The aggressive campaigns by states raise some tricky questions that could be tested before the Supreme Court and numerous other legal forums in 2024. Should tech firms be allowed to decide what they allow on their platforms without government interference? And can material potentially harmful to children be restricted without also restricting free speech?

The Obscure Google Deal That Defines America's Broken Privacy Protections

WIRED reported:

Before Google's disastrous social network Google+ came the less remembered Google Buzz. Launched in 2010, Buzz survived less than two years. But its mishandling of people's personal data motivated the first in a series of legal settlements that, though imperfect, are the closest the U.S. has come to establishing extensive rules for protecting privacy online.

When users set up a Buzz account, Google automatically created a friend network made up of people they email, horrifying some people by exposing private email addresses and secret relationships. Washington regulators felt compelled to act, but Google had not broken any national privacy law — the U.S. didn't have one.

The Federal Trade Commission improvised. In 2011 Google reached a 20-year legal settlement dubbed a consent decree with the agency for allegedly misleading users with its policies and settings. The decree created a sweeping privacy standard for just one tech company, requiring Google through 2031 to maintain a "comprehensive privacy program" and allow external assessments of its practices. The next year, the FTC signed Facebook onto a near-identical consent decree, settling allegations that the company now known as Meta had broken its own privacy promises to users.

WIRED interviews with 20 current and former employees of Meta and Google who worked on privacy initiatives show that internal reviews forced by consent decrees have sometimes blocked unnecessary harvesting and access of users' data. But current and former privacy workers, from low-level staff to top executives, increasingly view the agreements as outdated and inadequate. Their hope is that U.S. lawmakers engineer a solution that helps authorities keep pace with advances in technology and constrain the behavior of far more companies.

Artificial Intelligence Is Already in Use at HHS

Politico reported:

As Washington scrambles to regulate artificial intelligence in healthcare, the Department of Health and Human Services already uses the technology in its day-to-day work — and expects AI to play a larger role over the next several years.

HHS is one of the top agencies using AI — fourth only to NASA and the Departments of Commerce and Energy — according to a recent Government Accountability Office report which looked at implemented or planned AI uses reported by the department.

Within HHS, the FDA uses AI to power its customer services chatbot and HIV.gov uses it to make Instagram videos and graphics about HIV prevention and write job descriptions. Other agencies are considering AI: The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration said it supports a National Institute of Mental Health study on using the technology to improve the quality of the 988 suicide crisis line, but added it would not use AI to replace counselors who answer calls.

Surveillance Technology Is Advancing at Pace — With What Consequences?

The Guardian reported:

The U.K. is not Russia. For all that the many civil liberty campaigners will complain, as is their role, the independence of the judiciary remains strong. The laws relating to freedom of association, expression and right to privacy are well-defended in parliament and outside.

But the technology, the means by which the state might insert itself into our lives, is developing apace. The checks and balances are not. The Guardian has revealed that the government is legislating, without fanfare, to allow the police and the National Crime Agency to run facial recognition searches across the U.K.'s driving license records. When the police have an image, they will be able to identify the person, it is hoped, from the photographic images the state holds for the purposes of ensuring that the roads are safe.

There are those who say that none of this is anything to worry about for those who have done nothing wrong. This summer, the government abolished the office of the biometrics and surveillance camera commissioner, an independent watchdog.

The last holder of that role, Fraser Sampson, told the Guardian that this was the argument that frustrated him more than any other. The computer will say you are there, at the perimeter of a crime or perhaps at the heart of it, and at times there will be scant opportunity or even motive to argue back. Think of the speeding cameras and the notices that few contest.

COVID, RSV and Flu Cases Spike as UPMC Reinstates Mask Wearing to Slow Spread

CBS News Pittsburgh reported:

UPMC has reinstated its mask mandate.

The chief medical officer at UPMC told KDKA-TV that in the last six to eight weeks, more and more people are being treated for many illnesses.

The health system is asking everyone to mask up to slow the spread.

Boston Hospital Reinstates Masking Policy Amid Uptick in Respiratory Illnesses in the Area

Boston 25 News reported:

A major Boston hospital has reinstated its masking policy for staff and patients due to higher rates of respiratory illness in the area.

The adjustment to Dana-Farber Cancer Institute's face mask policy took effect on Monday and will continue for the "foreseeable future," according to a post on the hospital's website.

Mask-wearing policies were first rolled to slow the spread of COVID-19 during the 2020 pandemic.

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